

Message Text

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PAGE 01 STATE 008635
ORIGIN NODS-00

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 /001 R

66011
DRAFTED BY S/S-O:LFLEISCHER
APPROVED BY S/S-O:LFLEISCHER
-----130932 121950Z /50
O 121853Z JAN 78 ZFF4
FM SECSTATE WASHDC
TO WHITE HOUSE IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T STATE 008635

NODIS
FOR BRZEZINSKI

FOL TEL SENT ACTION SECSTATE FROM DAMASCUS DTD 12 JAN 1978 QTE

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 0237

NODIS

FOR SECRETARY FROM MURPHY

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV SY US
SUBJECT: PROPOSED SECRETARIAL VISIT TO DAMASCUS FOLLOWING JERUSALEM
TALKS

REF: DAMASCUS 236

1. I RECOMMEND THAT FOLLOWING ATTENDANCE AT JERUSALEM TALKS
YOU VISIT DAMASCUS TO BRIEF SYRIAN LEADERSHIP ON STATUS
OF NEGOTIATIONS AND, EVEN MORE IMPORTANTLY, ON US INTENTIONS
AND EXPECTATIONS.

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2. AM PROMPTED TO MAKE THIS RECOMMENDATION BY THE DISTURBING
UNDERTONES OF THE PRESENTATIONS BY ASSAD AND KHADDAM LAST
WEEK TO CODEL ZABLOCKI AND KHADDAM'S JANUARY 11 PRESENTATION
TO CODEL WILLIAMS/STEVENS. I SENSE SYRIAN SUSPICIONS ARE
VERY HIGH THAT THE USG IS UP TO NO GOOD AS FAR AS ARAB
(READ SYRIAN) INTERESTS ARE CONCERNED. ALTHOUGH NEITHER

THE PRESIDENT NOR THE FOREIGN MINISTER ARTICULATED WITH ANY PRECISION STEPS THEY PLAN TO TAKE IN NEAR FUTURE, ONE POINT EXPRESSED BY SEVERAL CABINET MINISTERS PRIVATELY TO ME -- AND ALLUDED TO BY KHADDAM IN HIS JANUARY 11 MEETING -- IS THAT SYRIA IS BEING FORCED INTO THE SOVIET CAMP IN REACTION BOTH TO THE "US-CREATED IRANIAN-SAUDI-EGYPTIAN AXIS" AND TO THE SYRIAN PRESUMPTION OF ISRAELI DEEDS TOWARD THIS COUNTRY. THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP HAS ALREADY MOVED TO ASSURE SOVIET POLITICAL SUPPORT AND INCREASED FLOW OF ARMS. I COULD EXPLAIN LATTER AS SIMPLE OPPORTUNISM, EXPLOITING THE RIGHT MOMENT TO BEEF UP THE SYRIAN ARSENAL, BUT I BELIEVE THERE IS GENUINE CONCERN AT HIGH LEVELS HERE THAT THIS COUNTRY COULD SOON BECOME THE TARGET OF ISRAELI ATTACK.

3. REPORTS POINT TO RECENTLY ENHANCED POSSIBILITIES FOR SYRO-IRAQI RAPPROCHEMENT -- A DEVELOPMENT WHICH I SEE IN NO WAY BENEFITTING OUR INTERESTS IF, AS I ASSUME, ANY SUCH RAPPROCHEMENT WILL INVOLVE SYRIAN MOVEMENT TOWARDS HARDLINERS. DURING HIS INTENSIVE TALKS HERE JANUARY 10-12, ALGERIAN PRESIDENT HAS BY ALL REPORTS BEEN TRYING TO INCREASE ENTICEMENTS TO SYRIA TO RESOLVE ITS DIFFERENCES WITH IRAQ. WE DO NOT YET KNOW WHAT RESULTS ALGERIAN FOMMIN BOUTEFILKA MAY HAVE ACHIEVED IN HIS LAST LIGHTNING ROUND-TRIP TO BAGHDAD FROM DAMASCUS JANUARY 61 (REFTEL).

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4. YOUR VISIT WOULD BE USEFUL OCCASION TO REASSURE THE SYRIANS THAT WE WOULD OPPOSE ANY UNPROVOKED ISRAELI STRIKE. IN ADDITION, VISIT WOULD BE DESIRABLE BECAUSE:

A) WE AGREED DURING YOUR LAST VISIT HERE THAT WE WOULD KEEP THE SYRIANS INFORMED OF DEVELOPMENTS IN THE NEGOTIATIONS;

B) A SECRETARIAL VISIT HAS BEEN OUR TRADITIONAL WAY OF KEEPING THE SYRIANS INFORMED AT CRITICAL TURNING POINTS;

C) IT IS A PUBLIC SIGNAL THAT WE VALUE OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SARG AND WANT TO CONTINUE WORKING WITH THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP TOWARDS THE GOAL OF A COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTION;

D) CONVERSELY, NOT TO VISIT DAMASCUS WOULD BE SEEN AS LESSENER SYRIAN IMPORTANCE OF NEGOTIATIONS IN US EYES.

5. ARGUMENTS AGAINST YOUR VISIT WOULD BE:

A) YOUR CONCLUSION THAT DEVELOPMENTS IN JERUSALEM

HAVE PRODUCED NOTHING ENCOURAGING REGARDING POSSIBLE RECONCILIATION OF ARAB AND ISRAELI VIEWPOINTS. IF THE LATTER WERE THE CASE, TO ADMIT THIS TO THE SYRIANS WOULD ONLY INCREASE THEIR INTRANSIGENCE AND CONVICTION THEY ARE ON THE RIGHT TRACK.

B) A JUDGMENT THAT YOUR STAYING AWAY FROM SYRIA AT THIS POINT WOULD INCREASE SYRIA'S ANXIETY AND CONSEQUENTLY STIMULATE THEIR DESIRE NOT TO BE EXCLUDED FROM THE PEACE PROCESS. I DO NOT FIND THIS ARGUMENT PERSUASIVE, PARTICULARLY SINCE SYRIA IS UNDER DAILY PRESSURE TO ADOPT AN EVEN MORE RIGID STANCE VIS-A-VIS ISRAEL AND THE EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI TALKS. WE NEED A COUNTERVAILING PRESSURE.

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7. YOUR VISIT NEED BE NO MORE THAN A FEW HOURS AND COULD POSSIBLY BE COMBINED WITH A STOP IN AMMAN SUCH AS YOU MADE ON RETURNING TO THE STATES LAST AUGUST.

8. IN SUM, IT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO ASSESS JUST WHERE SYRIA IS HEADING BUT I FIND THE CURRENT SIGNS DISCOURAGING. IF SYRIANS ARE INCLINED TO STAY ON DEAD CENTER, YOUR VISIT COULD AT A MINIMUM HELP KEEP THEM THERE.

9. PLEASE ADVISE.
MURPHY UNQUOTE CHRISTOPHER

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: POLITICAL SETTLEMENT, VISITS, CAT-B, MINISTERIAL VISITS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 12 jan 1978
Decaption Date: 20 Mar 2014
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978STATE008635
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: O:LFLEISCHER
Enclosure: REPEAT OF DAMASCUS 237
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: N780001-0359
Format: TEL
From: STATE
Handling Restrictions:
Image Path:
ISecure: 2
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780169/aaaacgbn.tel
Line Count: 148
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: b036fce3-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ORIGIN NODS
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: NODIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: NODIS
Reference: 78 DAMASCUS 236
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 17 jun 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3782574
Secure: LOCK1
Status: NATIVE
Subject: PROPOSED SECRETARIAL VISIT TO DAMASCUS FOLLOWING JERUSALEM TALKS
TAGS: PGOV, OVIP, PBOR, SY, US, XF
To: WHITE HOUSE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/b036fce3-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014